

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Eugene L. Arva, *The Traumatic Imagination: Histories of Violence in Magical Realist Fiction* (Cambria Press, 2011)

Magical realism has for a long time attracted the attention of critics beyond the Latin American circle with which it has traditionally been associated, despite its inception going back to the German historian Franz Roh. For well over a decade now, roughly coinciding with the boom in Postcolonial Studies, the academy has also witnessed a fruitful critical development in the field of Trauma Studies as explorations seeped out beyond the medical circle into the cultural and literary terrains. The move reflects the evolution of the notion of trauma from bodily injury in its original Greek conception, firstly to psychological disorder following World War I, and later to the cultural phenomenon we witness today. It is noteworthy that Cathy Caruth's influential *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* came out in the same year – 1995 – that Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy Faris edited the volume *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, which included the key essays on the topic (Faris actually wrote the foreword to Arva's book). In his book, Eugene L. Arva sets out to make explorations of his own on the themes of trauma and magical realism as the latter is deemed the literary mode best suited to work through traumatic memory and act out narrative memory.

Arva does not simply glue together the two critical objects, though. Over the Introduction and Chapters 1, 2 and 3, the author proffers a rather long but careful theoretical context which includes presentations of previous and related work done on the fields as well as what he defines as his own interdisciplinary conceptual tool: traumatic imagination. Traumatic imagination, says Arva denoting the Freudian influence,

is intended to describe an empathy-driven consciousness that enables authors and readers to act out/work through trauma by means of magical realist images. I posit that traumatic imagination is responsible for the production of many literary texts that struggle to *re-present* the unrepresentable and, ultimately, to reconstruct events whose forgetting has proven just as unbearable as their remembering. The traumatic imagination is also the essential consciousness of survival to which the psyche resorts when confronted with the impossibility of remembering limit events and with the resulting compulsive repetition of images of violence and loss. (5)

The concept is interdependent with another which Arva also formulates, the shock chronotope. In Bakhtinian terminology, a chronotope is a time-space unit (in this case a historical moment of tremendous violence) and 'shock' is borrowed from the medical discourse which in the post-World War I period emerged from the diagnostic of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). When rationalisation of an event is prevented due to its extreme violence, 'the traumatic time-space (the shock chronotope) is so shaky that making it artistically visible (turning it into an artistic chronotope) requires an act of *imagination*, which I call *traumatic*' (5). Traumatic imagination 'thus translates an unspeakable state (pain) into a readable image: it is the process by which shock chronotopes become artistic chronotopes' through magical realist writing (283).

Book reviews: *The Traumatic Imagination: Histories of Violence in Magical Realist Fiction* by Eugene L. Arva. Maria Sofia Pimentel Biscaia.

Transnational Literature Vol. 4 no. 2, May 2012.

<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

The following four chapters correspond to four violent events – or shock chronotopes – Arva sees as determining to the contemporary world. The shock chronotopes are slavery, colonialism, the Holocaust, and war. Immediately the reader feels the affinity between the former two and the latter two, which is confirmed as s/he reads on.

The slavery chronotope is represented by transcultural and transgenerational trauma in Caribbean fiction (121, 139): Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), Alejo Carpentier's *The Kingdom of This World* (1949), and Maryse Condé's *I, Tituba, A Black Witch of Salem* (1986). In the first case the argument is made that imagination becomes a means to work through trauma when both motherland and adoptive country are out of reach as a consequence of the shock chronotope of slavery. Carpentier's *The Kingdom* is read as simulacrum of the real chronotope of slavery where, unlike Baudrillard's hyperreality, magic realism operates so as to bring down the barriers between the real and the imagination and, in the process, reveal the continuum between the two. Condé's novel draws on the specific theme of rape and how it can be seen as a traumatic metonymy of the rape of a whole people and not just women.

Colonialism is approached by looking into Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981). In Arva's view, these authors manifest respectively the vicarious traumatising of Spanish and British colonialism (in the first case, *la violencia* period in Colombia is appropriately read as a subsidiary chronotope). Their protagonists fight through (work through) operations of historic agency and linguistic authority by engaging in processes of historical rewriting. Magic, imagination and nationalistic mythification are the tools used by García Márquez and Rushdie to tackle (post-)colonial traumata.

Arva chose Joseph Skibell's *A Blessing on the Moon* (1997) and Bernard Malamud's *The Fixer* (1966) to make his argument regarding the Holocaust chronotope. This remains an especially sensitive chronotope where factors like representation, authority, forgetting and silence still play decisive roles. The debate has been intense as Holocaust literature grows beyond testimonial narratives (memoirist literature) and immerses itself in the muddy waters of postmodernist *fiction* (219-22). In the selected novels, the authors emphasise goriness realistically while magnifying the horror, according to Arva, through the intrusion of magic elements, frequently of a dream-like nature. The dominant elements do belong to the realm of fantasy, like, for instance, the zombification of Chaim Skibelski (238) which picks up the *motif* (the traumatic symptom) identified by Arva in relation to Condé (159).

Finally the war chronotope's focus falls on Günter Grass's *The Tin Drum* (1959) and Tim O'Brien's *Going after Cacciato* (1978). Here the realistic imagery is equally dramatic but these writers work through the chronotope quite differently. Whereas Skibell and Malamud disclose the forms and emotional transactions of transgenerational trauma, Grass and O'Brien speak from the place of witnesses but also, more importantly, from the place of individual guilt. In *The Tin Drum*, Grass acts out (*re-covers*) and works through the ghost of complicity with the Nazi regime in his youth while O'Brien does the same with regards to Viet Nam/Vietnam (269-70).

The chapters on the chronotopes of slavery and colonialism read well and are cohesively presented when considering Arva's core concepts. However the following chapters struggle with the magical realist argument (though not obviously with trauma). For

instance, the chapter on the Holocaust chronotope discusses it in terms of fantasy rather than magical realism, and even then only briefly (231-3). Quoting Christopher Warnes, Arva himself admits that though magical realism can manifest itself in any trauma novel, it is in postcolonial ones that its creative and critical potential is realised most successfully (216). Also, the chapters on the Holocaust and war chronotopes develop similarly, but Arva is careful to remind us of their fundamental difference: vicarious witnessing versus direct testimony, the latter conveying the trauma of the perpetrator. This is an aspect which strikes me as critically necessary not only to recognise the existence of the trauma of responsibility (which is never to be equated with that of the victims) but also not to confine trauma victims to the discourse of martyrdom or heroism, that is, to act out their (re-)victimisation by creating spaces of silence and therefore restricting emotional areas of working out their traumas.

Arva's knowledge is extensive and comprehensive, though it would have been productive to see some discussion regarding the work of David Danow in *The Spirit of Carnival: Magical Realism and the Grotesque* (1995) for the relevance to the topics at hand. (Danow's book is also directly informed by Bakhtin but in this case by the concept of grotesque realism which Danow uses as his conceptual tool to approach Holocaust literature.)

The Traumatic Imagination might provide an analysis of familiar fictional material and in some cases texts have indeed been studied in analogous contexts and even comparatively (e.g. Rushdie and Grass on violence). However, Arva introduces innovative concepts of his own while remaining faithful to their original literary, cultural and critical sources.

Maria Sofia Pimentel Biscaia